

Villa Lewaro (Anne E. Poth Home)
North Broadway
Irvington
Westchester County
New York

HABS No. NY-5618

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NY
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

VILLA LEWARO (Anne E. Poth Home)

HABS No. NY-5618

HABS
NY
60-IRV
5-

Location: North Broadway, Irvington, Westchester County, New York

USGS Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates
18.595360.4542860

Present Owner
and Occupant: Anne E. Poth Corporation

Present Use: private nursing home

Significance: Villa Lewaro derives dual significance for both its architect and original owner. The former, Vertner Woodson Tandy, was New York's first licensed black architect. This building is known as his best work. The latter, Madame C.J. Walker, was a pioneer black businesswoman who became wealthy in the cosmetics industry.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of construction: 1918
2. Architect: Vertner Woodson Tandy

As a young man in Lexington, Kentucky, Vertner Woodson Tandy assisted his father, a prominent contractor who often acted as his own architect and contractor, with his work. The elder Tandy built some of Lexington's finest late-nineteenth century homes and was the brick contractor its city hall.

Upon completing Chandler Normal School in Lexington, Tandy attended Tuskegee Institute's Academy and School of Architecture, finishing in 1905. Under the Tuskegee plan, students participated in every aspect of constructing a building, from design to the making of bricks. With this kind of diversified practical building and drafting experience at Tuskegee, Tandy was admitted to Cornell as a special student and completed the four-year program in 1909 within three years.

After graduating from Cornell, Tandy established his architectural office at 1931 Broadway in New York City, the first by a black man in New York or any major northern city. His office remained in this area of New York for his entire 42 year career. At the time of his death in 1949, he was located around the corner at 36 West 66th Street.

Architect Tandy's first identifiable major project was a new home in Harlem for St. Phillip's Episcopal Church. The initial commission in 1909 was for a rectory and parish house. By 1910, construction was already underway for a church as well, also designed by Tandy, who was a member of the parish. The church still stands today, at 208 West 134th Street, but the rectory and parish house have been torn down.

Three years after St. Phillip's was completed, the business potential of Harlem's growing black population attracted entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker. She engaged Vertner Tandy to design her \$100,000 townhouse at 108-110 West 136th Street. The lower floor of the elegant, three-story Georgian townhouse was used as her beauty shop and school, while the upper two floors were her much talked about palatial residence. The three-story red brick townhouse with limestone trim was the pride of black Harlem and among the most costly built during that period.

In 1916, the threat of war caused New York Governor Charles Whitman to authorize the formation of the all-black 15th Regiment, the first black troops associated with the New York National Guard. Vertner Tandy was the first black candidate to pass the officers examination and become, in December of that year, the first black lieutenant of the regiment. Lieutenant Tandy organized and operated the Regiment's recruiting station in Harlem's black-owned Lafayette Theatre. Shortly after, Tandy was promoted to Commander of the Regiment's Company "A." His troops were reviewed by Governor Whitman. When the regiment went overseas, Captain Tandy remained in Harlem with other married men. He was promoted to major in 1917 and made commander of the 15th Regiment's depot battalion. While in the National Guard, Tandy was commissioned by Madame C.J. Walker to design Villa Lewaro.

Of Tandy's identified works, Villa Lewaro is known as the finest. The outstanding design of it helped his office to be known around the country. For a number of years, his was the only architectural firm which hired young black architects in the northern United States. In addition to providing opportunities for black architects, the Tandy office contributed to the success of New York's black builders.

Until 1965, Tandy had designed more buildings in Harlem than any other black architect. His greatest building period in the area was during the 1920s, when Harlem was becoming the largest black urban community in the United States. Mother Zion A.M.E. Church (1921), the Imperial Elks Lodge (1924), Prince Hall Lodge (1925), and Dr. Vincent's Sanitarium, are the only known Tandy buildings of that period currently standing in Harlem.

3. Original and subsequent owners:
 Madame C.J. Walker
 Lelia Walker Robinson
 Anne E. Poth Corporation
4. Contractor: Miller and Reed
5. Alterations and additions: Only minor changes have been made to conform to codes and changes of use. The room on the south side below the sleeping porch has been converted to a chapel and all original windows have been replaced with stained glass. The second floor windows have been replaced in the rear by aluminum windows. An elevator has been added at the north entrance (original main entrance) of the house and an elevator room extends approximately eight feet above the rear (west) roof slope. Also on the west side of the house, a steel fire escape from the third floor to the terrace has been added. A heavy overgrowth of trees and brush obscure the once commanding view of the Hudson River. The garden and the pergola are no longer in existence and code restrictions do not allow the use of the swimming pool.

- B. Historical Context: Three years after the completion of her Tandy-designed Harlem townhouse and beauty shop and school, successful cosmetics entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker commissioned the architect to design a country home for her as well. The story of the mansion was widely reported at the time in both the black and white press. Walker entertained some of the country's most influential and well-known persons at this palatial residence, including Enrico Caruso, who was given the honor of naming the estate. He derived the name, Villa Lewaro, from the first two letters of each part of Walker's daughter's name -- Lelia Walker Robinson. When asked by a guest why she built the house, Walker replied that she had not built it for herself but so that blacks could see what could be accomplished with hard work and determination.

Villa Lewaro was left to Lelia Walker Robinson following her mother's death only eight months after its completion. In 1931, as her mother had requested, Robinson willed the property to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, prohibitive upkeep expenses and taxes prevented the organization from accepting the bequest. Most of the house's priceless interior furnishings were sold at public auction. The house was sold at auction in 1931 for \$47,000 to become the Anne E. Poth Home, a private nursing facility, which it remains today.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The three-story, 34-room mansion, designed to resemble the style and scale of an Italian Renaissance palace, overlooks the Hudson River from a five-acre site.
2. Condition of fabric: The house has been kept in excellent repair although minor cracking and water damage is visible inside. Only minor changes have been made to conform to codes and changes of use. The room on the south side below the sleeping porch has been converted to a chapel and all original windows have been replaced with stained glass. The second floor windows in the rear have been replaced by aluminum windows. An elevator has been added at the north entrance (original main entrance) of the house and an elevator equipment room extends approximately eight feet above the rear (west) roof slope. Also on the west side of the house, a steel fire escape has been added from the third floor to the terrace. Heavy overgrowth of trees and brush obscure the once commanding view of the Hudson River.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The house is rectangular in plan (113 feet x 60 feet), with three floors and a basement.
2. Walls: white stucco
3. Structural system: structural tile
4. Porches: There is a sleeping porch on the north side of the house which is enclosed with French doors on three sides, and opens onto a concrete balustraded open porch over an arched covered drive. There is a similar sleeping porch on the south side which is semi-circular. At the center of the North Broadway (east) elevation is a semi-circular, two-story portico supported by six Ionic columns on large square bases. A concrete terrace with a concrete balustrade, extends across the rear of the house. From this, stairs from either end extend down to a second terrace which has a recessed fountain in an arched niche.
5. Chimneys: Two chimneys are symmetrically located on the longer roof.

6. Roof:
- a. Shape, covering: The long dimension is covered by a hip roof intersecting with two end hip roofs. The roof framing is wood truss. Two gabled dormers extend from the roof on each side except for the North Broadway (east) side of the house. The roof covering is red tile.
 - b. Cornice: The deep cornice contributes to the building's Italian Renaissance character.
- C. Description of Interior: While Madame Walker was in residence, the house had 34 rooms, of which the most impressive were located in the first floor. These included a 21' x 32' living room and the "Gold Room," which was indeed trimmed in gold leaf. This room contained a \$25,000 organ that was designed to pipe music throughout the house. The ceilings were decoratively handpainted by imported European artists. Ceiling heights in the two rooms was 18.' A marble stairway extended from the first floor to the second, which had bedrooms, five bathrooms, and sleeping porches. The third floor served as the servants quarters.
- D. Site: The building sits on an east-west sloping five-acre site overlooking the Hudson River. At the west end of the garden is a pergola supported by concrete Ionic columns. There is a split-level two-car garage with servants quarters above on the south side of the site. It has a tile roof and a stucco finish. The west side has a lower level which opens to the back of the site and was once used as a stable.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Villa Lewaro (Anne E. Poth House), National Historic Landmark nomination form, 1975.

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Historic American Buildings Survey
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